

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF WISCONSIN**

KENDRICK DANE SELLERS,

Plaintiff,

v.

TRACY L. THOMPSON, JULIE
LUDWIG, KELLY PELKY, and
HANNAH UTTER,

Defendants.

Case No. 23-CV-1014-JPS

ORDER

Plaintiff Kendrick Dane Sellers, an inmate confined at New Lisbon Correctional Institution, filed a pro se complaint under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 alleging that the defendants violated his constitutional rights by denying him medical care. ECF No. 1. On October 30, 2023, the Court screened Plaintiff's complaint and allowed him to proceed against Defendants. ECF No. 10. On December 14, 2023, the Court denied Plaintiff's motion to consolidate cases and allowed Plaintiff the opportunity to file an amended complaint ECF No. 19. Plaintiff filed an amended complaint on December 28, 2023. ECF No. 20. This Order screens Plaintiff's amended complaint, ECF No. 20, and resolves his pending motion to appoint counsel and motion for expedited screening, ECF Nos. 13, 21.

1. SCREENING THE AMENDED COMPLAINT

1.1 Federal Screening Standard

Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court must screen complaints brought by prisoners seeking relief from a governmental entity or an officer or employee of a governmental entity. 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(a).

The Court must dismiss a complaint if the prisoner raises claims that are legally “frivolous or malicious,” that fail to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or that seek monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b).

In determining whether a complaint states a claim, the Court applies the same standard that applies to dismissals under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6). *See Cesal v. Moats*, 851 F.3d 714, 720 (7th Cir. 2017) (citing *Booker-El v. Superintendent, Ind. State Prison*, 668 F.3d 896, 899 (7th Cir. 2012)). A complaint must include “a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2). The complaint must contain enough facts, accepted as true, to “state a claim for relief that is plausible on its face.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)). “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows a court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Id.* (citing *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556).

To state a claim for relief under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege that someone deprived him of a right secured by the Constitution or the laws of the United States and that whoever deprived him of this right was acting under the color of state law. *D.S. v. E. Porter Cnty. Sch. Corp.*, 799 F.3d 793, 798 (7th Cir. 2015) (citing *Buchanan–Moore v. County of Milwaukee*, 570 F.3d 824, 827 (7th Cir. 2009)). The Court construes pro se complaints liberally and holds them to a less stringent standard than pleadings drafted by lawyers. *Cesal*, 851 F.3d at 720 (citing *Perez v. Fenoglio*, 792 F.3d 768, 776 (7th Cir. 2015)).

1.2 Plaintiff's Allegations

Plaintiff names Defendants Tracy L. Thompson ("Thompson"), Julie Ludwig ("Ludwig"), Kelly Pelky ("Pelky"), and Hannah Utter ("Utter") as defendants who violated his Eighth Amendment rights by their deliberate indifference to his serious medical need. ECF No. 20 at 2. On January 18, 2023, Plaintiff was diagnosed by an endocrinologist with Cohn Syndrome (primary aldosteronism) at SSM Health St. Agnus Hospital. *Id.* The specialist recommended that Plaintiff take 50 mg eplerenone once a day with the ability to increase if the blood pressure still needed to be controlled. *Id.* Thompson failed to follow this recommendation for no medical reason whatsoever. *Id.* On April 6, 2023, medical staff took Plaintiff's vitals and he complained of agonizing chest and stomach pains. *Id.* Plaintiff wrote a letter to the specialist saying he did not want to die at an early age because of something managed so easily. *Id.* Thompson was aware of the situation but said she would address the issue at his next provider appointment on May 31, 2023. *Id.*

Plaintiff suffered from acute chest pain and high blood pressure until May 4, 2023, because Thompson never followed the instructions of the specialist. *Id.* at 4. Plaintiff suffered for months in agonizing pain; Thompson agreed to the specialist's recommendations but did not follow them. *Id.* Plaintiff requested help from Ludwig and Pelky on numerous occasions to intervene, but they did nothing. *Id.* Utter had Plaintiff's files and said Thompson had reached out to endocrinology, but Utter knew that was not true. *Id.* Plaintiff suffers long-term injuries from Defendants' failure to follow Plaintiff's treatment plan. *Id.* He was rushed to the ER at some point and has to wear a heart monitor. *Id.*

In March 2023, Plaintiff requested emergency assistance from HSU for rectal bleeding. *Id.* at 5. Thompson failed to rely on his medical records and said it was hemorrhoids even after her internal exam noted no hemorrhoids. *Id.* Thompson ordered a stool sample and wrote a letter saying that all labs were normal, with no signs of bleeding, no inflammation, and no anemia. *Id.* Plaintiff paid for a copy of his test results which showed that Thompson lied. *Id.* Officer Augesen contacted HSU to inform them that he saw blood when Plaintiff called him to the restroom. *Id.* Plaintiff received an abnormal colonoscopy with no signs of hemorrhoids. *Id.* at 5-6. Plaintiff again begged Ludwig and Pelky for help, but they did nothing. *Id.* at 6. Utter reviewed the file and did nothing, despite having Plaintiff's labs in front of her. *Id.* Plaintiff now has GI and heart problems as a result of Defendants' deliberate indifference to his medical needs. *Id.*

1.3 Analysis

The Court finds that Plaintiff may proceed against Thompson, Ludwig, Pelky, and Utter on an Eighth Amendment deliberate indifference claim for their indifference to Plaintiff's serious medical need. The Eighth Amendment secures an inmate's right to medical care. Prison officials violate this right when they "display deliberate indifference to serious medical needs of prisoners." *Greeno v. Daley*, 414 F.3d 645, 652 (7th Cir. 2005) (internal quotation omitted). Deliberate indifference claims contain both an objective and a subjective component: the inmate "must first establish that his medical condition is objectively, 'sufficiently serious,'; and second, that prison officials acted with a 'sufficiently culpable state of mind,' i.e., that they both knew of and disregarded an excessive risk to inmate health."

Lewis v. McLean, 864 F.3d 556, 562–63 (7th Cir. 2017) (quoting *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 834 (1994) (internal citations omitted)).

“A delay in treating non-life-threatening but painful conditions may constitute deliberate indifference if the delay exacerbated the injury or unnecessarily prolonged an inmate’s pain.” *Arnett v. Webster*, 658 F.3d 742, 753 (7th Cir. 2011) (citing *McGowan v. Hulick*, 612 F.3d 636, 640 (7th Cir. 2010)). The length of delay that is tolerable “depends on the seriousness of the condition and the ease of providing treatment.” *Id.* (quoting *McGowan*, 612 F.3d at 640). At the screening stage, the Court finds that Plaintiff’s allegations are sufficient to proceed against Thompson, Ludwig, Pelky, and Utter. Plaintiff alleges acute chest pain and high blood pressure for several months, and that Defendants failed to provide him treatment or follow the medical advice from the specialist. Plaintiff also alleges these same Defendants failed to properly treat his rectal bleeding. As such, Plaintiff may proceed against Thompson, Ludwig, Pelky, and Utter on an Eighth Amendment deliberate indifference claim for their indifference to Plaintiff’s serious medical needs.

2. MOTION TO APPOINT COUNSEL

The Court will deny Plaintiff’s motion to appoint counsel without prejudice. As a civil litigant, Plaintiff has “neither a constitutional nor statutory right to a court-appointed attorney.” *James v. Eli*, 889 F.3d 320, 326 (7th Cir. 2018). However, under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(1), a “court may request an attorney to represent any person unable to afford counsel.” A court should seek counsel to represent a plaintiff if: (1) he has made reasonable attempts to secure counsel; and (2) “the difficulty of the case—factually and legally—exceeds the particular plaintiff’s capacity as a layperson to coherently present it.” *Navejar v. Iyiola*, 718 F.3d 692, 696 (7th Cir. 2013)

(quoting *Pruitt v. Mote*, 503 F.3d 647, 655 (7th Cir. 2007) (en banc)). Whether to appoint counsel in a particular case is left to a court's discretion. *James*, 889 F.3d at 326; *McCaa v. Hamilton*, 893 F.3d 1027, 1031 (7th Cir. 2018).

While framed in terms of a plaintiff's capacity to litigate, this discretion must also be informed by the realities of recruiting counsel in this District. When a court recruits a lawyer to represent a pro se party, the lawyer takes the case pro bono. Unlike a lawyer appointed to represent a criminal defendant during her prosecution, who is paid by the government for the work, an attorney who takes a prisoner's civil case pro bono has no promise of compensation.

It is difficult to convince local lawyers to take such cases. Unlike other districts in this Circuit, *see, e.g.*, L.R. 83.35 (N.D. Ill.), the Eastern District of Wisconsin does not employ an involuntary appointment system for lawyers admitted to practice in the District. Instead, the District relies on the willingness of lawyers to sign up for the Pro Bono Attorney Panel and, once there, accept appointments as needed. *See Pro Bono Program, available at:* <http://www.wied.uscourts.gov/pro-bono-program>.

The District is grateful to the lawyers who participate in the Pro Bono Program, but there are never enough volunteers, and those who do volunteer rarely take more than one or two cases a year. This is understandable, as many are already busy attending to fee-paying clients. Although the Pro Bono Program does provide for payment of certain litigation expenses, it does not directly compensate a lawyer for his or her time. Participants may seek attorney's fees when permitted by statute, such as in successful § 1983 cases, but they will otherwise go unpaid. The small pool of attorneys available to this District for pro bono appointments stands in stark contrast to that of the Court of Appeals, which regularly recruits

counsel from across the nation to represent pro se plaintiffs on appeal. *See, e.g., James*, 889 F.3d at 323 (appointing counsel from Washington, D.C. to represent the pro se appellant); *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1029 (same).

Additionally, it must be remembered that, when a court determines that counsel recruitment is appropriate, it can take months to locate a willing lawyer. This delay works to the detriment of all parties and contravenes Congress's instruction in Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 1 that district courts must endeavor to secure the "just, speedy, and inexpensive determination of every action." Fed. R. Civ. P. 1. Thus, looming large over each request for counsel are a court's ever-more-limited time and resources.

With these considerations in mind, the Court returns to the question presented: whether counsel can and should be recruited to represent Plaintiff at this stage in this case. First, a court asks whether the litigant has made "reasonable" efforts to obtain his own representation. *Pruitt*, 503 F.3d at 655; *Jackson v. County of McLean*, 953 F.2d 1070, 1073 (7th Cir. 1992). It is a question not often litigated; many district court judges either overlook arguably unreasonable efforts at obtaining counsel, or they impose eminently practical requirements such as the submission of evidence demonstrating that the prisoner has tried and failed to secure representation from several lawyers. *See, e.g., Kyle v. Feather*, No. 09-cv-90-bbc, 2009 WL 2474627, at *1 (W.D. Wis. Aug. 11, 2009).

The first element of *Pruitt* is fairly easy to satisfy, but it is not toothless, and it is not a mere technical condition of submitting a certain number of rejection letters. If it was, then a Wisconsin prisoner litigating a § 1983 action could submit rejection letters from ten randomly selected criminal defense lawyers from Nevada and call his work complete. This cannot be. The purpose of the reasonable-efforts requirement is to ensure

that if a court and private lawyers must expend scarce resources to provide counsel for a prisoner, he has at least made a good-faith effort to avoid those costs by getting a lawyer himself. To fulfill this duty, a pro se prisoner should reach out to lawyers whose areas of practice suggest that they might consider taking his case. If he learns that some of the lawyers he has contacted do not, he should reach out to others before he concludes that no one will help him.

Plaintiff provides evidence showing that he contacted attorneys to represent him in this matter. ECF No. 13-1. The Court finds that Plaintiff satisfies the first *Pruitt* question.

Plaintiff's request must also succeed on the second *Pruitt* question: whether the difficulty of the case exceeds his capacity to coherently present it. This assessment must be made in light of the particular capabilities and circumstances presented by each pro se litigant. *James*, 889 F.3d at 326–27. The Court of Appeals explains:

The second step is itself grounded in a two-fold inquiry into both the difficulty of the plaintiff's claims and the plaintiff's competence to litigate those claims himself. The inquiries are necessarily intertwined; the difficulty of the case is considered against the plaintiff's litigation capabilities, and those capabilities are examined in light of the challenges specific to the case at hand. Ultimately, the question is not whether a lawyer would present the case more effectively than the pro se plaintiff; if that were the test, district judges would be required to request counsel for every indigent litigant. Rather, the question is whether the difficulty of the case—factually and legally—exceeds the particular plaintiff's capacity as a layperson to coherently present it to the judge or jury himself. Notably, this inquiry extends beyond the trial stage of the proceedings. The relevant concern is whether the plaintiff appears competent to litigate his own claims, given their degree of difficulty. This includes all of the tasks that

normally attend litigation: evidence gathering, preparing and responding to motions and other court filings, and trial.

Id. (citations and quotations omitted). While a court need not address every concern raised in a motion for appointment of counsel, it must address “those that bear directly” on the individual’s capacity to litigate his case. *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1032.

The balancing contemplated in the second *Pruitt* step must be done against the backdrop that district courts cannot be expected to appoint counsel in circumstances which are common to all or many prisoners. See *Bracey v. Grondin*, 712 F.3d 1012, 1017–18 (7th Cir. 2013); *Pruitt*, 503 F.3d 647, 656 (observing that the Seventh Circuit has “resisted laying down categorical rules regarding recruitment of counsel in particular types of cases”); *Harper v. Bolton*, 57 F. Supp. 3d 889, 893 (N.D. Ill. 2014). Doing so would place untenable burdens on court resources. It would also turn the discretion of § 1915(e)(2) on its head, making appointment of counsel the rule rather than the exception.

Several pronouncements from the Court of Appeals appear to be in tension with this principle. First, the Seventh Circuit notes that “complexity increases and competence decreases as a case proceeds to the advanced phases of litigation.” *James*, 889 F.3d at 327. It deems the “[a]dvanced phases” to include those from discovery onward. *Id.*; *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1032. But nearly every prisoner case proceeds to discovery, as the district court applies exceedingly lenient review during initial screening.

Second, the Seventh Circuit instructs that district courts should evaluate a prisoner’s competency irrespective of the involvement of a “jailhouse lawyer.” *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1033; *Walker v. Price*, No. 17-1345, 2018 WL 3967298, at *5 (7th Cir. Aug. 20, 2018). How courts should do this

is not clear. A court rarely knows whether a filing was prepared by the plaintiff or someone helping him. And if a court does know that the plaintiff is receiving help, how can it assess his ability to litigate without knowing which portions of the filings are his work, and which come from the jailhouse lawyer? In *Walker*, the court determined that the inmate's work product decreased in quality after his jailhouse lawyer was transferred to another prison. 2018 WL 3967298, at *6. Yet a savvy prisoner, looking to secure counsel for himself, could do this on purpose, crafting his filings to downplay his own litigation capabilities. A court would have no way to assess whether the inmate is sandbagging it.

Finally, the Court of Appeals indicates that claims involving the state of mind of the defendant, such as those involving deliberate indifference, are particularly complex. *James*, 889 F.3d at 327–28; *McCaa*, 893 F.3d at 1032. Yet a government official's culpable mental state is the foundation for most constitutional claims. Indeed, it is often the defining characteristic that sets § 1983 claims apart from their state-law tort analogues. Deliberate indifference is essential to nearly all claims of cruel and unusual punishment, excessive force, mistreatment of medical needs, and First Amendment and due process violations. See *Kingsley v. Henderson*, 135 S. Ct. 2466, 2473 (2015); *County of Sacramento v. Lewis*, 523 U.S. 833, 849 (1998); *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976); *Hambright v. Kemper*, 705 F. App'x 461, 462 (7th Cir. 2017); *Milton v. Slota*, 697 F. App'x 462, 464 (7th Cir. 2017) (“[N]egligently inflicted harm does not amount to a constitutional violation.”) (emphasis in original). Taken together, these claims comprise the vast majority of prisoner litigation in this District. If state-of-mind issues are generally beyond the ability of most pro se litigants to prove, then a

court likely would need to appoint counsel in nearly every prisoner case. This is plainly impossible.

The guiding rule has always been that appointment of counsel is the exception rather than the rule in pro se prisoner litigation. Yet a confluence of all-too-common circumstances—discovery, jailhouse lawyers, and claims concerning state of mind—militate in favor of the appointment of counsel. As the list of reasons to appoint counsel grows, the reasons not to do so shrink. This District’s resources have not kept pace.

Against this backdrop, the Court finds that Plaintiff has not presented sufficient evidence and argument showing that he cannot litigate or try this matter competently on his own. In his motion and accompanying documents, Plaintiff indicates that he faces imminent danger of serious injury without counsel. ECF Nos. 13, 14.

It is true, as Plaintiff intuits, that a lawyer would be helpful in navigating the legal system; trained attorneys are of course better positioned to successfully litigate cases. But Plaintiff’s lack of legal training brings him in line with practically every other prisoner or former prisoner litigating in this Court. Plaintiff has clearly presented his claims to the Court and successfully brought claims from two different cases together through the present amended complaint. *See* ECF No. 19. Further, the Court will assist Plaintiff in this regard (as it does with all prisoner litigants) by providing copies of the most pertinent federal and local procedural rules along with its scheduling order. Thus, ignorance of the law or court procedure is generally not a qualifying reason for appointment of counsel. Plaintiff has not demonstrated that his case is exceptional to require counsel. Plaintiff has changed institutions since the initiation of this case, ECF No. 9, and it is unclear why Plaintiff believes he needs counsel to

address any imminent danger. The Court will issue a scheduling order for this case to proceed in due course and Plaintiff may seek assistance for the summary judgment process at a later date if needed.

3. CONCLUSION

In light of the foregoing, the Court finds that Plaintiff may proceed on the following claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b):

Claim One: Eighth Amendment claim against Thompson, Ludwig, Pelky, and Utter for their deliberate indifference to Plaintiff's serious medical need.

Defendants should take note that, within forty-five (45) days of service of this Order, they are to file a summary judgment motion that raises all exhaustion-related challenges. The Court will issue a scheduling order at a later date that embodies other relevant deadlines.

Accordingly,

IT IS ORDERED that Plaintiff's motion for expedited screening, ECF No. 21, be and the same is hereby **DENIED as moot**;

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that Plaintiff's motion to appoint counsel, ECF No. 13, be and the same is hereby **DENIED without prejudice**;

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that Defendants **Thompson, Ludwig, Pelky, and Utter** shall file a responsive pleading to the amended complaint, ECF No. 20, within sixty (60) days;

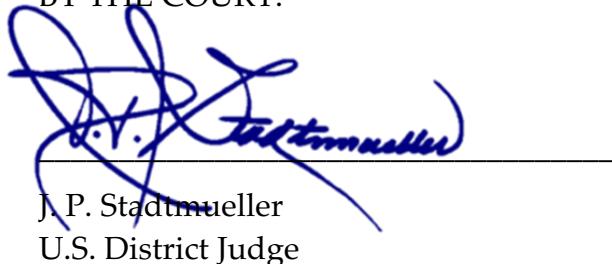
IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that Defendants raise any exhaustion-related challenges by filing a motion for summary judgment within forty-five (45) days of service; and

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED if Defendants contemplate a motion to dismiss, the parties must meet and confer before the motion is filed.

Defendants should take care to explain the reasons why they intend to move to dismiss the complaint, and Plaintiff should strongly consider filing an amended complaint. The Court expects this exercise in efficiency will obviate the need to file most motions to dismiss. Indeed, when the Court grants a motion to dismiss, it typically grants leave to amend unless it is “certain from the face of the complaint that any amendment would be futile or otherwise unwarranted.” *Harris v. Meisner*, No. 20-2650, 2021 WL 5563942, at *2 (7th Cir. Nov. 29, 2021) (quoting *Runnion ex rel. Runnion v. Girl Scouts of Greater Chi. & Nw. Ind.*, 786 F.3d 510, 524 (7th Cir. 2015)). Therefore, it is in both parties’ interest to discuss the matter prior to motion submissions. Briefs in support of, or opposition to, motions to dismiss should cite no more than ten (10) cases per claim. No string citations will be accepted. If Defendants file a motion to dismiss, Plaintiff is hereby warned that he must file a response, in accordance with Civil Local Rule 7 (E.D. Wis.), or he may be deemed to have waived any argument against dismissal and face dismissal of this matter with prejudice.

Dated at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, this 1st day of April, 2024.

BY THE COURT:



J. P. Stadtmauer
U.S. District Judge

Plaintiffs who are inmates at Prisoner E-Filing Program institutions shall submit all correspondence and case filings to institution staff, who will scan and e-mail documents to the Court. Prisoner E-Filing is mandatory for all inmates at Columbia Correctional Institution, Dodge Correctional Institution, Green Bay Correctional Institution, Oshkosh Correctional Institution, Waupun Correctional Institution, and Wisconsin Secure Program Facility.

Plaintiffs who are inmates at all other prison facilities, or who have been released from custody, will be required to submit all correspondence and legal material to:

Office of the Clerk
United States District Court
Eastern District of Wisconsin
362 United States Courthouse
517 E. Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202

DO NOT MAIL ANYTHING DIRECTLY TO THE COURT'S CHAMBERS. If mail is received directly to the Court's chambers, **IT WILL BE RETURNED TO SENDER AND WILL NOT BE FILED IN THE CASE.**

Plaintiff is further advised that failure to timely file any brief, motion, response, or reply may result in the dismissal of this action for failure to prosecute. In addition, the parties must notify the Clerk of Court of any change of address. **IF PLAINTIFF FAILS TO PROVIDE AN UPDATED ADDRESS TO THE COURT AND MAIL IS RETURNED TO THE COURT AS UNDELIVERABLE, THE COURT WILL DISMISS THIS ACTION WITHOUT PREJUDICE.**